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Emergent Bilingual Students and Middle Level Social Studies: Overcoming the “Huh?”

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Abstract: Throughout my career in middle level education, I have taken note of how my emergent bilingual students react to assignments and lessons in my history classes. Direct instruction and primary source materials can prove especially challenging. In this article, I hope to provide middle school Social Studies educators with strategies that I have found to be successful in my classroom when teaching English Learner (EL) students history. Building a relationship, adhering to accommodations, scaffolding concepts and vocabulary, and incorporating a student’s culture into lessons can help us overcome the “Huh?” in the classroom.

Keywords: emergent bilingual, English Learner (EL), direct instruction, primary source, accommodations, scaffolding, cultural incorporation

Introduction

Imagine that you have been dropped into 4th period of a 7th grade classroom in Japan. You know very little about Japan, its culture, its people, and its education system. You also have absolutely no idea what the teacher in your 4th period class is saying but you are expected to answer questions and complete assignments. You can feel your cheeks heating when you are asked a question and have no idea how to respond. Everyone is staring, so the teacher dismisses you and moves on with the lesson. You immediately shut down and stare at your desk for the rest of the day.

This scenario happens more often than most teachers realize. Every day, students who do not use English as their primary language or are from other countries are placed into the American public school system. In fact, the United States Department of Education (2018) reports that South Carolina alone has experienced a 200 to 399.9% increase in the number of English Learner

(EL) students attending South Carolina public schools. Assimilating into not only a new home but a new nation, creates anxiety and fear in many young students within our nation’s school systems. Add in the subject material that these students are expected to learn, and you have a problem that continues to compound on itself. Middle school social studies, and the subject’s source materials, can be extremely difficult for EL students. For example, try presenting a student who has just arrived from Honduras with a copy of the Declaration of Independence. Ask that student to tell you the main idea. You will undoubtedly get the “Huh?” look or a blank stare accompanied with a total shut down. The difficult part of teaching history to EL students is overcoming that “Huh?”. Here are some strategies to help.

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Connect with the Student

Connecting with the student is crucial, even if the connection you make is something small like learning to say your student’s name correctly. Many cultures around the world place an incredible amount of significance on the names of their children. Google now has a mobile version of its Translate application, which makes communicating with students in any language a breeze. I communicate daily with one of my students who speaks Russian using this app and we have learned so much about one another. I know her music preferences, what part of Ukraine she is from, how many siblings she has, etc. It has made all the difference in her learning in my class. Patience is also essential with this step, especially when teaching middle school EL students. We must always be aware that EL students have typically left behind friends, communities, and even families in some cases (Haynes & Zacarian, 2018). This kind of emotional upheaval can cause lasting trauma that will likely take time to heal. Be patient and consistent. Ask questions every day regarding their day, needs, and struggles. In time, they will come to trust you. Building the relationship with these students must happen first.

Work with your EL Teachers

Accommodations are there for a reason for EL students. Work closely with your district or school’s EL instructor to determine the best strategies to employ with your students. Typical accommodations can include providing vocabulary terms ahead of a lesson, scaffolding certain concepts, or using videos and stories in the classroom. Once you have been made aware of your EL student’s

accommodations, adhere to them. Be aware, this process is going to take a lot of your time; however, when you begin to see your student understand the concepts you are trying to teach them, it will be worth it. With history classes, teaching vocabulary ahead of time, utilizing pictures with words in students' native language and English, and modeling expected outcomes are essential.

A good point of reference for this would be to show your EL students images of the *Hunley* submarine after you have provided them with the definitions of what "submarine" means in English and in their dominant language. History offers us a wealth of images for all levels of students and by teaching vocabulary terms prior to the lesson, your EL students can begin to make connections between the words they have learned and the images you are showing them on topics like the American Civil War.

Set High Expectations

Providing middle level EL students with an equitable education simultaneously requires setting certain expectations of these students. Setting high expectations is something that teachers have heard in professional development meetings for years; however, where our EL students are concerned, high expectations can either create success or disconnection in the classroom. In the next section discussing scaffolding, I will mention keeping the lessons and materials presented to emergent bilingual students as basic as possible. What should be understood is that "basic" in this context does not imply "simple" or "easy." Teach your emergent bilingual students the same content that you are teaching your monolingual students but modify the instruction and materials to reflect your EL students' present level of knowledge on the subject you are teaching.

Scaffold, Scaffold, Scaffold

Now that you have established a meaningful relationship, set high expectations, and begun to implement your EL student's accommodations, it is imperative that you build upon their knowledge throughout the school year. Keep things basic at first. For example, identify the main points in your lesson on the French and Indian War and then begin building on that knowledge to show your EL student that this war was the catalyst for an even bigger war – The American Revolution. Once you have assessed that your students have shown growth in those main points, move onto more challenging material; however, continue to keep this material as basic as possible.

Incorporate Their Culture

With history and geography classes, incorporating an EL student's culture can be simple. If you are teaching geography, when you come to the continent of your EL student's home nation, ask them if they are comfortable sharing what their home was like with the class. Chances are, they are eager to talk about their experiences.

Middle school social studies classes present us with a healthy dose of perspective. Try encouraging all the students in your class to see historical events from multiple sides. When discussing the Russian Revolution, you might ask a student of Russian nationality or descent how this subject was taught to them.

Currently, I have a student whose family is from Mali. I was so excited when he told me this. We discussed in class how much of the food we consume in the South is heavily influenced by African culture. My student was ecstatic to share how his family prepares food at home with my other students and, in turn, the other students were shocked at how similar the preparation was to the food they are accustomed to. This discussion allowed me to make connections with my students about the Atlantic Slave Trade. It was a fantastic teaching day.

Conclusion

Teaching EL students can be one of the most rewarding experiences in an educator's career; however, it can also prove to be one of the most intimidating and confounding experiences in an educator's career. I am unable to say how many times I have seen my colleagues struggle with students who arrive in their classes with little or no English proficiency. I have had colleagues tell me to just "make them comfortable" and that their grades will fall where they may. Yes, making EL students comfortable is part of the plan, but we as teachers should do this by establishing a meaningful relationship with our EL students, working closely with the EL professionals in our district or schools, assisting our students' learning by building on prior knowledge and scaffolding, and aiding assimilation by adding in parts of our EL students' culture.

Letting middle level EL students fall between the cracks because we might be on unsteady ground cannot happen. These students deserve an education just as much as everyone else. Be vigilant in providing accommodations and, above all, be patient.

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About the Author



Asten Leonard is currently attending the University of South Carolina to obtain her M.Ed. in Multicultural Contexts of Education. A South Carolina native, Asten is an educator at D.R. Hill Middle School teaching seventh and eighth grade social studies. Asten lives in Campobello, South Carolina with her husband and son.

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